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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000534

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAN: RIPPED KHOMEINI PIC PUTS OPPOSITION ON ITS HEELS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, Iran Regional Presence
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On December 14 the Tehran Prosecutor General announced the arrest of several unnamed individuals accused of desecrating a portrait of the Islamic Republic's revered founder 'Imam' Khomeini, purportedly filmed during the December 7 anti-government protests on Student Day. The December 8 broadcast of the footage - in which several unidentifiable men ripped then burned an image of Ayatollah Ali Khomeini - touched off a firestorm in Iran and elicited condemnation from every political figure of note, as well as ominous threats from the IRGC. As the hardline media used the images as "evidence" that the opposition's goals were to overthrow the Islamic Republic, seminarians and government supporters took to the streets to denounce the "insult" to Khomeini. 'Green Path' leaders Mousavi and Karrubi furiously tried to distance their movement from the act, suggesting that the incident was manufactured to discredit them and pave the way for a harsher crackdown by hardliners in the government. On December 13, Supreme Leader Khamenei condemned 'those who refuse to accept the election results' for encouraging people to confront the system, and for emboldening Iran's enemies. If nothing else, this incident has put Iran's 'Green Path' opposition movement on its heels. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) On December 8, Iranian state television repeatedly broadcast a short video clip of several men ripping up then setting afire a poster-sized photo of the Islamic Republic's late founder, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, purportedly filmed December 7 during the Student Day anti-government demonstrations. The desecration of Khomeini's portrait drew immediate condemnation from virtually every political actor in Iran, as hardliners rushed to leverage the incident as evidence that 'Green Path' oppositionists and their leaders are intent on toppling, not reforming, the Islamic Republic system. At the other end of the political spectrum, oppositionists scrambled to proclaim their loyalty to Khomeini and to the system, suggesting that the video had been concocted to discredit their movement and provide a pretext for the even harsher suppression of government critics. Hassan Khomeini, a grandson of the Ayatollah with well-known reformist tendencies, harshly criticized the state broadcaster IRIB for airing these images, asserting the move was engineered by pro-Ahmadinejad forces to incite public sentiment.

¶3. (C) Outrage over the footage has supposedly sparked protests across Iran, though the extent to which the protests are an

organic response is unclear. Seminars students in particular have rushed to defend Khomeini; classes at some seminars were canceled and BBC Farsi reports protests at several seminars, including in Qom, Tehran, Mashhad. Iran state TV broadcast footage of seminary students chanting, "Death to America," "Death to Israel," and "Death to the UK." The bazaar in Qom closed and there have been scattered popular demonstrations in support of Khomeini around Iran as well.

¶4. (C) The controversy is also playing out on campuses, where students groups are competing to showcase their respect for Khomeini while hardline students are rallying to 'defend' Imam Khomeini. Tehran University in particular is reportedly extremely tense, and has witnessed daily demonstrations and incursions by the security forces since December 7. On December 13, a report by the official state news agency IRNA implied that Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, had stoked the controversy by addressing students at various campuses in Tehran. Predictably, the IRGC and Basij issued statements promising to "crush" those responsible.

¶5. (C) During a December 13 address to seminary students and clerics carried live on state television Supreme Leader Khamenei condemned this act against the late Imam, characterizing it as another attempt by Iran's opponents to create discord. He exhorted Iranian oppositionists to stop their anti-regime activities, which only serve to embolden Islamic Iran's enemies. Acknowledging that all right-thinking Iranians are outraged by the desecration of Khomeini's picture, he nonetheless stressed the need for dealing with it 'peacefully,' since further strife will only please Iran's enemies.

¶6. (C) Late in the day December 14, IRNA broke the news that
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several individuals accused of defiling Khomeini's photograph had been arrested and were undergoing interrogation. Tehran Prosecutor General Abbas Jafa'ari-Dolatabadi promised that "no mercy will be shown to those guilty of insulting the Imam [Khomeini] and top officials of the system." According to Dolatabadi, at least one person has already confessed to the crime.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Having largely ignored protesters directly attacking Khamenei, the IRIG's condemnation en masse of the footage gives the affair a somewhat manufactured appearance. Indeed, the breadth of the reaction, including seminary protests, the media blitz, and statements from nearly every key official or government body, suggests the IRIG is marshaling its resources in a coordinated attempt to tarnish the opposition. Whether the IRIG orchestrated the entire affair, including the footage itself, or is simply taking advantage of an opportunity is unclear. But the regime has not been above such tactics before, most notably Khatami-era Iran when there were claims that the government used scantily-clad and raucous youth driving through the streets during religious holidays shouting pro-Khatami slogans to discredit the reformist movement.

¶8. (C) COMMENT, CONT: Regardless, the IRIG's effort has put the opposition on the defensive. Opposition leaders have denounced any denigration of Khomeini but have had to defend the Student Day protesters and their movement - indications that they consider the accusations against them to be significant. Khamenei in his speech signaled that he is losing his patience with the opposition leaders, saying that though he hasn't rejected them, the opposition has persisted in trying to

distance itself from the regime. Whether his comments indicate a readiness to arrest opposition leaders remains to be seen; with the purported perpetrators of the crime now in custody, their forthcoming 'confessions' may be an indicator of the regime's intent. END COMMENT.
EYRE